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AUTHOR Greene, John Robert
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ABSTRACT

A community college basic speech instructor found that having students read public service announcements (PSAs) from various nonprofit organizations is a novel and beneficial way for them to experience the oral reading phase of the introductory speech course. Students chose one of three PSAs to read on the college radio station. The readings were recorded for the student and graded by the instructor from an office outside the broadcast booth. The radio audience was receptive to the rapid succession of "commercials," and students were uninhibited by the microphone. The radio reading proved to be particularly advantageous for the apprehensive students since the audience was invisible. The instructor was able to judge the students' vocal quality more accurately when screened from sight of the speaker. The evaluations were also more accurate because the microphone picked up the subtleties in the students' vocal patterns that had not been evident in the classroom. An alternative radio station in the form of a portable reading carrel and a tape recorder with a microphone can serve the same purpose, by allowing students to read without facing a visible audience and allowing the instructor to grade the students' vocal style without watching their physical delivery. (A sample PSA is included.) (HTH)

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THE BASIC SPEECH COURSE AND THE COLLEGE RADIO STATION

John Robert Greene
Assistant Professor, History and Speech
Cazenovia College
Cazenovia, New York 13035

The teacher of the basic speech course at the Community College level invariably finds himself strained for ideas to keep the course vibrant and imaginative. Often teaching without the support of a formal speech program or department, the instructor may feel in somewhat of a creative vacuum. However, many Community Colleges, whether or not they have a Communications or a Journalism program, have a college radio station, traditionally one of the most popular extracurricular activities on any campus. The college station can be of value to the survey instructor in many ways. This brief essay will detail how I use the Cazenovia College station, WITC-FM (of which I am the faculty advisor) to assist me in the Oral Reading phase of the introductory course.

The Problems of the Oral Reading

The Oral Reading presents several special problems in the basic course. Traditionally one of, if not the first graded talk in the course, the student is usually asked to read and interpret a previously delivered, "classic" speech. This format carries with it several problems. One professional concern is whether or not the students should be allowed to choose their own speeches, or if the instructor should retain a modicum of control by assigning the speeches -- a hefty load, given the steadily increasing size of classes. Being the first talk, several students invariably get to the front of the classroom, face their peers, and then mumble the fated words, "I can't do this." This defeat may destroy the student's chances for improvement; if it doesn't, the sheer boredom of having to listen to thirty recitations of what are all too often very stuffy speeches might.

Yet the most important problem with the Oral Rading is that of grading. In principle the talk is designed to evaluate the student's vocal delivery -- voice inflection, conversational tone, phrasing, and the like. While some students, particularly those who have been through a high school speech or drama course, have few problems in any of these areas, most beginning speakers need to alter some phase of their oral delivery. The Oral Reading can help to isolate the areas which are in need of improvement. Yet when listening to these speeches, I invariably found myself being influenced by the way that the student looked, and the students who looked more at ease in front of the class were getting the better grades. Closing my eyes and trying to listen did me no good - one student thought that I was sleeping. There seemed no way around it - what should have been an objective study of a student's voice was being prejudiced by the student's physical delivery.

A seeming solution to this problem came to me when working with my students on the radio station. WITC, in common with most other non-commercial/college stations, receives Public Service Announcements (PSA's) from various non-profit

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organizations. These announcements are read by the student Disc Jockeys, in lieu of the paid advertisements that an educational station is not permitted to sell (an example of a PSA script is appended to this essay). I spend quite a bit of time working with my DJ's on their on-air reading style, insisting that they read the PSA's both with some conviction and at a reasonable rate of speed. It occurred to me that reading these PSA's over the radio station would be a novel way for my Speech students to go through their Oral Reading.

The Radio Reading -- The Format

The Speech classes were made aware of the nature of their Oral Reading assignment on the first day of class -- none dropped as a result. After the usual introductory lectures on audience and speaker analysis and vocal style (with particular emphasis on voice inflection and conversational tone), and with no great amount of time spent on the formalities of reading a prepared script, the Radio Readings began.

Despite the fact that WITC was already on the air with a host of nervous first-year DJ's, the logistics of the assignment went quite smoothly. Each of the Speech students were assigned a time to be at the station, time that was taken during our regular class period. When they entered the studio, they were given three PSA's, none of which they had seen before. They were given about two minutes to look over the scripts, and decide which one that they would read. While they were preparing, I took their cassette tape (like many Intro teachers, I require the students to tape their talks) into the booth, and gave it to the DJ, who inserted it into the studio's tape recorder.

The Speech student was asked to read from the news booth, where they were shielded from the direct line of sight of the DJ. The end of the record then playing was the student's cue to begin reading. I graded them from the station's outer office, while listening to their talk on the office monitor. After taking about one minute (or less, given the beginning speaker's tendency for having a speaking rate that is close to the speed of light), we spent about one minute discussing the experience in the office. After receiving their tape and their grade sheet, the student left. For each student, the entire process took about five minutes.

The Problems that Never Came

I was mentally prepared for all sorts of problems when I first developed this assignment. None of my fears were actualized. What the audience listening to their radio heard was a rapid succession of "commercials" for fifty-five minutes, but it was not so abusive that we received any complaints -- I concluded that most of the audience thought that this was a normal part of our programming. The DJ also had no trouble with the process. Instead of the complaints that I expected, they actually liked the assignment -- several DJ's told me that they "felt like teachers." Perhaps it was a welcome break to watch someone in the studio who was as nervous as they were.

The more potentially serious of my fears, of course, dealt with the host of reactions that I expected from my Speech students. I assumed, for example, that they would be afraid of the microphone. Not so. As soon as they were reassured, either in class or just before they went into the studio, that they were neither responsible for turning the microphone on, or for controlling the volume, they acted as if it was not even there. In the three semesters that I have dealt with this assignment, only two students have voiced any kind of microphone apprehension, and it did not hinder their overall performance.

One other potential problem which never materialized was a fear of being in the radio station itself. Being met either by myself, or by one of my DJ's, and being escorted into the booth seemed to allay any apprehension. Several of the speech students already knew the DJ's, and this also helped with the transition. The Speech students later recalled that once in the news booth, shielded from outside contact, they lost any sensation of "being on the radio."

Advantages for the Student

In terms of the speech experience itself, the Radio Reading proved to be particularly advantageous for the apprehensive student. Students who had seemed particularly nervous when called upon to speak in class improved greatly on the radio, where they were speaking without a visible audience. Indeed, it is quite possible that this experience alleviated much of their speech anxiety. One student, who had shown herself in the classroom to be painfully shy, mispronounced the word "announcement" during her radio reading. There was a pause of close to ten seconds -- had she been in front of a classroom audience, chances are that she would have retreated from the situation. However, after her painful silence, she continued to read, albeit too slowly and deliberately. During the short critique after her talk, I congratulated her on her courage. She looked at me and whispered, "I couldn't quit, Dr. Greene...I was on the radio!" This young woman eventually shed most of her apprehensions -- one doubts that this would have been the case had she stumbled during a traditional Oral Reading.

Another strength of this talk is that the student is less prone to display any of the problems with their physical delivery that may be evident in a speech that is delivered while standing before an audience. One student, for example, had previously displayed a habit of playing with her hair when speaking. A quick peek by myself revealed that while sitting in the booth, it was more difficult for her to reach her hair -- after the radio reading, this habit was less prevalent in her delivery.

There are several ways that the radio reading contributes to positive reinforcement for the student. One results from the student's ability to listen to their colleague's talks on the radio before it is their turn, thus lessening their "fear of the unknown." Another point that my students brought to my attention after the first time we did this assignment was the tremendous reinforcement that the wearing of headphones provided. Several students remarked that they felt more at ease after they realized that they could hear themselves through the headphones, they were more able to notice any problems with their voice. They discovered that even while they were reading, the headphones, like the microphone itself, exaggerated their vocal delivery, and made it easier to scrutinize.

The Advantages for the Instructor

The experience of grading the Radio Reading was a truly pleasant one. Shielded from any sight of the speaker, I was able to judge the student's vocal quality more accurately than I had ever been able to do. Before, the more confident student with the better physical delivery had invariably scored a higher grade on the Oral Reading. Now, I was no longer prejudiced by watching my students read. My evaluation was also helped by the fact that the students were reading into a microphone. The mike picked up subtleties in the student's vocal pattern that had previously eluded me in the classroom. For examle, even the mildest quivering of a student's voice was detected over the air. The microphone also highlighted any gravelliness in the student's voice, as well as the less pronounced changes in their voice inflection. It should also be added that these same subtleties are picked up on the tape recorder.

An Alternative

It has occurred to me that if your school does not have a radio station, or if it is inconvenient to utilize it in the method just described, a reasonable facsimile can easily be constructed. A portable reading booth, such as those used as library carrels or in language labs, is the perfect substitute. A small microphone can be inserted into a tape recorder, so that a student can record their talk, and it can easily be placed out of the student's sight. If the instructor sits within a relative close distance of the student they can hear the reading, without distracting the student. This is not quite as helpful as utilizing the station monitor, but it incorporates the key facets of this technique -- having the student read without facing a visible audience, and having the instructor grade the student's vocal style without watching the student's physical delivery.

Technology is not an easy thing to work into a speech course, particularly on the two year level. Many of us are not lucky enough to have access to a huge audio-visual department, or to be able to work with a bountifully equipped speech lab. The utilization of the college radio station, however, is a relatively painless technique, which offers a host of advantages for both instructor and student. I have found that my classes have liked this assignment, and the response on my faculty evaluation forms for the past three semesters is that, next to the mock job interview that they complete, they feel the radio reading to be the most helpful talk of the course. In this assessment, I wholeheartedly agree.

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